

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15A)
Matthew 15:21-28

From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us." Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel." But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me." He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table." Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.

"Well, yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Y'all—you could have heard a pin drop.

After watching her daughter suffer one too many days, this mama, a foreigner from Canaan, bucked convention, crossed international boundaries, swore off cultural customs and made her way to Jesus. Every parent knows that when your child is suffering you will do anything, *anything*, to stop their pain.

But NO ONE had done anything like this.

Something deep in this mama's gut though told her that even though that even though she was outsider, if this Jesus was who he said he is, the son of the Creator of heaven and earth, then there was hope and grace for *EVERYONE*, including her.

But Jesus...well, Jesus shows a side of himself that personally rubs me the wrong way.

He's dismissive.

He's impatient.

And he's so doggone certain that he knows the nature of his papa's grace and mission—*focus on the people of Israel first. The others can wait.*

So, Jesus ignores her.

To add injury to insult, his disciples tell her to go away.

And if that wasn't enough, he says point blank: my priority is on the people of Israel, not you—an outsider.

But that desperate mama will not abide such a narrow view of God.

"Well, yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

In other words:

"Yes, I know what you're saying Jesus: the Israelites may have been God's chosen people.

But Jesus, I don't think even you quite get it.

I've got a few years on you, and you're still growing into the fullness of yourself.

*And here's the thing: I **know** I have a right to God's grace.*

*I **know** that God does not create mistakes. And, I know that if you are who you say you are then there is restoration and grace available for us all.*

There. is. hope.

Jesus, you've got wrong.

Disciples, you've got it wrong.

Even the crumbs give life. Even a little is a lot. Even I belong."

So, here we are. In the silence of this woman's truth.

It is ultimately God's truth.

This woman doesn't claim to know why her daughter is ill. She doesn't claim to have all the answers. She's not trying to predict the election of the temple and senatorial leaders. She's not even sure she knows the best way to raise her daughter. All she wants to do is experience Jesus for who he says he is—merciful and loving and powerful. She's not gonna bow down until it pours through her soul.

A million questions must have run through Jesus' mind in that moment. I imagine in the silence of those initial seconds Jesus thought: "Welp, I came to bring wholeness and life to God's chosen ones, but perhaps this women is right. I am called to much more than I thought possible—because when it comes down to it we're all children of Abraham, aren't we? Maybe there's more to my story, my whole ministry than I've fully understood. There *is* more than enough grace and mercy to go around."

As is often the case for us, this unexpected encounter was a soul-defining moment for Jesus that changed how he understood himself and his purpose: from boundaried to ever-expanding; from neat to complex. Now, this doesn't mean that Jesus made a mistake. It doesn't mean he and God weren't on the same page. It means that Jesus, whose divinity did not cancel out his humanity had to grow up and into the fullness of who he was created to be. Simply put, Jesus changed.

What would it mean to follow a Savior who is not simply a distant deity, but a guy, whose humanity is as life-giving and transformative as his divinity, a guy who let himself be changed by the outsider, by someone outside his zone of comfort and familiarity? As Debie Thomas writes, “what would it be like to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus...who humbles himself long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider can teach? What [then] would it be like to stop limiting who we will be for other people, and who we will let them be for us?”¹

If anything is going to heal the divisions and hatred that have infected our world, it will come from people like you and me—people who know that like Jesus, we still have some growing up to do. To be a friend of Jesus is to do the same thing—get out of our comfort zone, to place ourselves in situations that may unsettle us and to grow into our identity as the hand and feet of Jesus who refuse to settle for justice and wholeness for some and not all.

While I was away I visited with a dear friend who shared with me that she has taken to having coffee once a month with someone whose theological and political beliefs couldn’t be further from hers. I was shocked when she told me, and I said, “why would you put yourself through that? That would stress me out?” She told me, “Well, we all need to do it. I’m learning where she is coming from. She is learning where I am coming from. And we don’t try and change each other. But you know what, we have changed? We do see things differently. We are more cautious to jump to conclusions. She doesn’t post some of the things that she used to on social media. And she asks questions and knows I won’t judge her.” I’ve several days thinking about my friend’s courage and tenacity, her willingness to push the envelope in the name of healing and love.

Because, let’s be honest: How many times though have we tried to circumscribe forgiveness or mercy or grace to others because of their political beliefs, dress, language, values, race, or education differs from us? How many times have we been certain of how and to whom our time ought to be spent that we nearly miss the opportunity to transform and be transformed by the people and situations we least expected?

It’s what that desperate mamma from a foreign land did with Jesus and his disciples all those years ago. And when she did they all discovered that God’s mercy is not finite.

¹ Debie Thomas, “Is it Good News Yet?” *Journey with Jesus*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2716>, accessed August 11, 2020.

Can we open up our hearts and hands and minds to receive it, hearts and minds, open and growing in love and not simply certitude?

Every Friday morning NPR airs a two-to-three-minute segment called Story Corps. It's a chance for family members, friends, and co-workers interview one another about anything, and the stories are archived at the Library of Congress. A few years ago, a 9 year-old boy interviewed his father and asked if he was proud of him and what he hoped for him. He didn't say that he wanted his child to grow up and become smart or a doctor or semi-professional athlete. Instead, he said, whether his son is a cab driver or anything else he wants him to know that he's proud of him and not giving up him for caring and making a difference no matter what. As the dad explained:

"there's an old proverb that talks about when children are born, children come out with their fists closed because that's where they keep all their gifts. And as you grow, your hands learn to unfold, because you're learning to release your gifts to the world. This father said this child: 'For the rest of your life, I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded.'"²

Our call as friends of Jesus is to forever and ever unfold our hands, our hearts, and our minds to receive the mercy Jesus pours out on us and to share it in abundance with everyone—not on occasion, but as a way of life. Can you let this soul-stirring love be the mantle on your lips, the fire in your bellies, and the song in your hearts until the hearts of all people taste and see the goodness of our God—not regardless of anyone's age and ethnicity, race or gender, sexuality or income status, but even because of them—because of their beauty, because of their story, because grace and mercy are not a winner-take-all/zero-sum game.

That is what makes God proud.

You see—

when Jesus unfolded his hands that day as he traveled he discovered there were more than enough to go around.

He kept those hands open even on to the cross, and he let his blood become the morsels that forever strengthen and transform the worst thing of our lives into the birthplace of new life. That is the promise of Jesus' death and resurrection.

² "Dad to Son: 'Live with Hands Unfolded...Release Your Gifts to the World'" *Storycorps* https://www.npr.org/2015/03/20/394061800/dad-to-son-live-with-hands-unfolded-release-your-gifts-to-world?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=npr&utm_medium=social&utm_term=nprnews?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=npr&utm_medium=social&utm_term=nprnews.

As we continue through this pandemic journey, through a new school year, and election season:

Unfold your hands

Unfold your heart.

Unfold your mind.

Feast on the mercy and the hope and the beauty that has your name—
and that of your neighbor—
written all over it.

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